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Water



Levee repair along the San Joaquin River in California, February 2017

Key Message 1

Changes in Water Quantity and Quality

Significant changes in water quantity and quality are evident across the country. These changes, which are expected to persist, present an ongoing risk to coupled human and natural systems and related ecosystem services. Variable precipitation and rising temperature are intensifying droughts, increasing heavy downpours, and reducing snowpack. Reduced snow-to-rain ratios are leading to significant differences between the timing of water supply and demand. Groundwater depletion is exacerbating drought risk. Surface water quality is declining as water temperature increases and more frequent high-intensity rainfall events mobilize pollutants such as sediments and nutrients.

Key Message 2

Deteriorating Water Infrastructure at Risk

Deteriorating water infrastructure compounds the climate risk faced by society. Extreme precipitation events are projected to increase in a warming climate and may lead to more severe floods and greater risk of infrastructure failure in some regions. Infrastructure design, operation, financing principles, and regulatory standards typically do not account for a changing climate. Current risk management does not typically consider the impact of compound extremes (co-occurrence of multiple events) and the risk of cascading infrastructure failure.

Key Message 3

Water Management in a Changing Future

Water management strategies designed in view of an evolving future we can only partially anticipate will help prepare the Nation for water- and climate-related risks of the future. Current water management and planning principles typically do not address risk that changes over time, leaving society exposed to more risk than anticipated. While there are examples of promising approaches to manage climate risk, the gap between research and implementation, especially in view of regulatory and institutional constraints, remains a challenge.

Ensuring a reliable supply of clean freshwater to individuals, communities, and ecosystems, together with effective management of floods and droughts, is the foundation of human and ecological health. The water sector is also central to the economy and contributes significantly to the resilience of many other sectors, including agriculture, energy, urban environments, and industry.

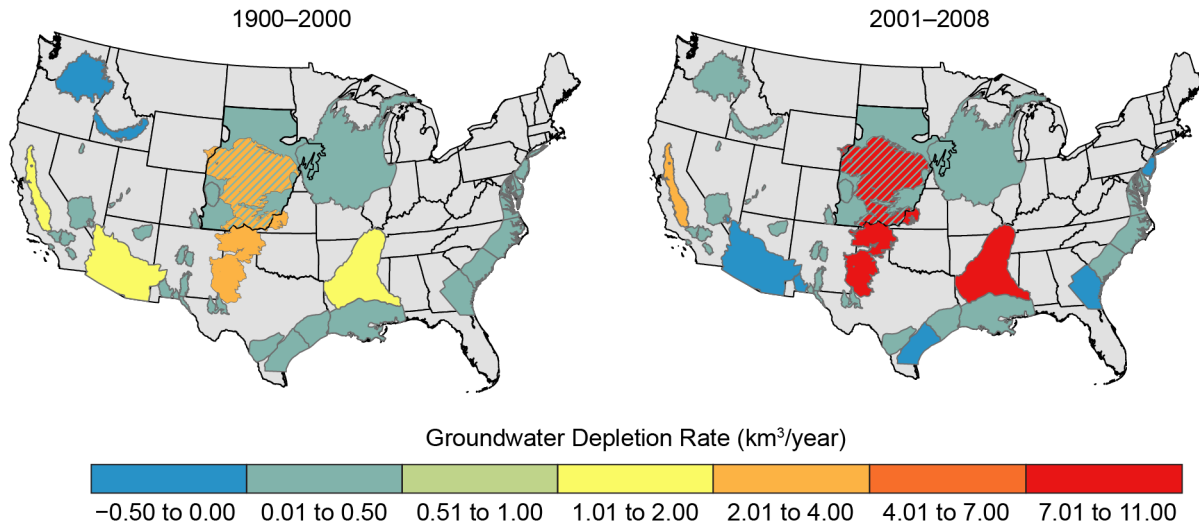
Water systems face considerable risk, even without anticipated future climate changes. Limited surface water storage, as well as a limited ability to make use of long-term drought forecasts and to trade water across uses and basins, has led to a significant depletion of aquifers in many regions in the United States. Across the Nation, much of the critical water and wastewater infrastructure is nearing the end of its useful life. To date, no comprehensive assessment exists of the climate-related vulnerability of U.S. water infrastructure (including dams, levees, aqueducts, sewers, and water and wastewater distribution and treatment systems), the potential resulting damages, or the cost of reconstruction and recovery. Paleoclimate information (reconstructions of past climate derived from ice cores or tree rings) shows that over the last 500 years, North America has experienced pronounced wet/dry regime shifts that sometimes persisted for

decades. Because such protracted exposures to extreme floods or droughts in different parts of the country are extraordinary compared to events experienced in the 20th century, they are not yet incorporated in water management principles and practice. Anticipated future climate change will exacerbate this risk in many regions.

A central challenge to water planning and management is learning to plan for plausible future climate conditions that are wider in range than those experienced in the 20th century. Doing so requires approaches that evaluate plans over many possible futures instead of just one, incorporate real-time monitoring and forecast products to better manage extremes when they occur, and update policies and engineering principles with the best available geoscience-based understanding of planetary change. While this represents a break from historical practice, recent examples of adaptation responses undertaken by large water management agencies, including major metropolitan water utilities and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, are promising.

For full chapter, including references and Traceable Accounts, see <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/water>.

Depletion of Groundwater in Major U.S. Regional Aquifers



(left) Groundwater supplies have been decreasing in the major regional aquifers of the United States over the last century (1900–2000). (right) This decline has accelerated recently (2001–2008) due to persistent droughts in many regions and the lack of adequate surface water storage to meet demands. This decline in groundwater compromises the ability to meet water needs during future droughts and impacts the functioning of groundwater dependent ecosystems (e.g., Kløve et al. 2014). The values shown are net volumetric rates of groundwater depletion (km³ per year) averaged over each aquifer. Subareas of an aquifer may deplete at faster rates or may be actually recovering. Hatching in the figure represents where the High Plains Aquifer overlies the deep, confined Dakota Aquifer. *From Figure 3.2 (Source: adapted from Konikow 2015. Reprinted from Groundwater with permission of the National Groundwater Association. © 2015).*